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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study were to discover if a list of 14 common experiences would be part of the student teachers' reflective process during their two 8-week practicums, and to evaluate how different mediums (written journals, telecommunications, and personal observation/conferences) would impact the student teachers' reflection process. The participants, 20 elementary student teachers, were not given formal training or guidance related to the reflection process, but were simply told to reflect on issues and experiences that concerned them. The students were required to use each of the three mediums, selecting one as the primary medium for reflection. Analysis of the data revealed that individual student teachers tended to reflect on discipline/management issues, effective teaching practices, the success of lesson plans, relationships with faculty and students, and feelings of self worth and confidence. They tended to use journals for sharing everyday teaching events with cooperating teachers; observation sessions with professors to address administrative issues, overall performance assessment, or schoolwide issues; and telecommunications when they had a sense of urgency about a specific issue and needed to solve immediate problems. (ND)

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AN EXAMINATION OF REFLECTIVE THINKING THROUGH A STUDY OF WRITTEN JOURNALS, TELECOMMUNICATIONS, AND PERSONAL CONFERENCES

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INTRODUCTION:

John Dewey made an important distinction in conceptualizing teachers' practices when he identified routine and reflective action. He defined routine action as teaching acts characterized by authority, impulse, and tradition. Persons who teach from this perspective uncritically accept the defined practices of schools and set about to find the most efficient and effective way to carry out regular practices. Because day-to-day practices are handled in familiar ways and prescribed manners, they are viewed as non-problematic and warrant no examination or change.

Conversely, Dewey defined reflective action as behavior which involves active, persistent, and careful consideration of any teaching belief, event, or practice. Reflective action involves meeting and responding to problems. People who teach from this perspective actively analyze teaching events from social, democratic, and political contexts in which their teaching is embedded. Their goal is to learn flexibility, experiment, and to communicate with other professionals so they can grow as teachers.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The primary purpose of this study was to discover if a pre-determined list of common experiences would be a part of the student teacher's reflective process during their two, eight week practicums. The secondary purpose was to evaluate how different mediums (written journals, telecommunications, and personal conferences) would impact the student teachers reflection process.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY:

In the spring of 1995, ten (10) elementary student teachers placed in the Ottumwa Regional Center and ten (10) elementary student teachers assigned in the Council Bluffs Regional Center were matched in pairs. Common major emphasis and specific grade

level student teaching placement was the basis for determining each matched pair.

Student teachers were given IBM computers equipped with modems and access to an 800 telephone number connecting them to the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) main frame computer. Each student teacher either already knew how or was trained to use e-mail distribution files.

Student teachers were not given formal training or guidance related to the reflection process. However, reflection was discussed and defined. The students were simply told to reflect on issues and experiences that concerned them. The students were required to use the following three mediums of reflection during each of the eight week placements:

1. Write in a journal daily, summarize the contents weekly, and send the summary to their professor.
2. Send e-mail reflections to their assigned partner and both UNI professors.
3. Make anecdotal notes and discuss them with their professor during the weekly observation in their school settings.

The students could choose the primary medium for reflection, but all three mediums must be used at least once.

The professors identified 14 common experiences they anticipated student teachers would choose to include in their reflections. The list was not shared with student teachers. Data was collected and summarized after the semester was completed.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY:

MEDIUM PREFERENCE FOR PRE-DETERMINED EXPERIENCES

EXPERIENCES	J	T	C
1. First day of their unit	12	6	2
2. First major discipline problem	12	6	2
3. First day they taught alone	8	7	5

EXPERIENCES (CONTINUED)	J	T	C
4. First day with a substitute teacher	5	5	4
5. First day they taught a science lesson	12	4	2
6. First time they taught everything	9	6	5
7. First snow day with a late start	6	3	1
8. The day before a spring break	5	10	5
9. The day they took a field trip	3	1	6
10. Parent-teacher conferences	3	4	13
11. Attended a teacher in-service program	3	5	12
12. First evaluation conference with coop teacher	3	3	14
13. First time observed by their professor	2	2	16
14. Goal setting after mid-term assessment	16	3	1

J=Written Journal; **T**=Telecommunications; **C**=Personal Conference

Some themes for reflection were noted. Student teachers frequently reflected on discipline/management issues; they stated effective teaching practices they would continue to use; they tended to believe lessons were less successful when their lesson plan was not followed; they discussed relationships with pupils and faculty members; and they revealed feelings of self worth and confidence. (Koskela and Cramer, 1994) and (Wilson and Cameran, 1994) found themes similar to what this study revealed.

CONCLUSIONS FROM THIS STUDY:

Everyday teaching events were generally shared first with the cooperating teacher. In many cases cooperating teachers responded in writing to specific journal reflections. Note: student teachers were not required to share journal entries with their cooperating teacher. (McIntyre and Tlusty, 1995) found dialog journals encouraged and facilitated the reflection process. (Shen, 1995) found that cooperating teachers were best at providing knowledge and opportunities for student teachers in day-to-day operations.

When student teachers were confronted with administrative issues, overall assessment performances, or school wide issues, they preferred to confer with their professor. Students revealed orally they trusted the professors broad view of schools because of their knowledge and varied experiences. (Schiller and others, 1994) found that professors were able to congratulate, commiserate, and give suggestions to student teachers regarding larger issues.

Telecommunications were used when student teachers had a sense of urgency. Reflections were usually brief. Often they focused on a specific issue. They generally ended in a question. For example, "What can I do now?" It appears that with these reflections, student teachers were not comfortable with the answer they got from their cooperating teacher or they wanted additional input. Gamesmanship was sensed by the professors. Student teachers used feedback from telecommunications to solve immediate problems. Cooperating teachers expressed they were impressed by the unique solutions their student teacher developed overnight. (McIntyre and Tlusty, 1995) found student teachers enjoyed having technology available to them because they got rapid feedback. They also concluded, there was no direct evidence the reflection process was improved because of e-mail communications.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THIS STUDY:

Student teachers need precise training related to the use of the reflection process. If cooperating teachers should model and discuss these practices like they do effective teaching practices, student teachers would be more likely to see reflection as a tool for self improvement. In this study cooperating teachers viewed reflection as a requirement for the course called student teaching and not as along-term professional tool. (Loughran, 1995) has specific suggestions for modeling reflective practices.

Giving student teachers three options of mediums for reflecting on a specific issue was a positive alternative. Student teachers felt more people were available to them. Friendships developed. When students returned to campus, they sought out

partners so they could actually meet the person they had communicated with for 16 weeks.

Finding more ways to incorporate the cooperating teacher into the reflection process seems desirable. At a minimum, student teachers should be required to share their weekly written journal summaries with their cooperating teacher. Student teachers who did share their reflections tended to get higher final evaluations. According to previous research (Stahlhut and Hawkes, 1990), reflection, plus communication promotes mentoring of young educators.

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